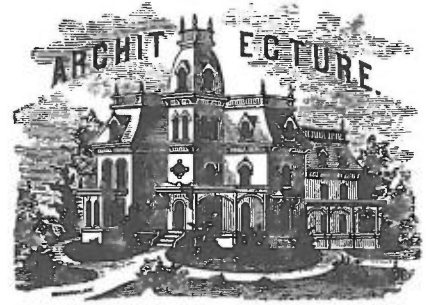


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Ernest W. Bowditch
1850-1918

Ernest W. Bowditch was a prolific landscape architect as well as an engineer whose technical understanding was applicable to civil engineering as well as architectural projects. Both the naturalist tradition of English landscape design and the formal gardens of Italy influenced Bowditch's aesthetic. Through his association with Boston architectural firms such as Peabody and Stearns and Cabot and Chandler, and his membership in a prominent Massachusetts family that gave him access to projects in wealthy suburbs and fashionable resorts, Bowditch established a geographically wide-ranging and varied practice. Eventually, he established offices in Boston, New York, and Cleveland that employed approximately sixty engineers and fourteen "foresters" or gardeners who carried out work on some 2,500 projects over a forty year period. Bowditch's obituary

acknowledged his achievements in sanitary engineering, estate and suburban planning, and park design. The *American Architect* placed Bowditch "...among that small but distinguished group of men who have elevated landscape architecture to its present high plane."¹

Ernest Bowditch was born on April 10, 1850, in Brookline, Massachusetts, to William Ingersoll and Sarah Rhea Higginson Bowditch, and through his father was descended from a prominent Salem, Massachusetts, family. Educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a special student in chemistry and mining subjects between 1865 and 1869, Bowditch later worked for the engineering department of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad and spent a year with the U.S. government expedition to the Isthmus of Darien as a topographer and geologist. In 1870 Bowditch became a civil engineer with the firm of Shedd and Sawyer and later worked with the landscape gardener Robert Morris Copeland, before forming a short-lived partnership with Frank Copeland. In 1889 Bowditch married Margaret Swann with whom he had four children.²

Although most of Bowditch's independent work has received relatively little attention in comparison to that of his contemporary Frederick Law Olmsted, Bowditch's design for the community of Tuxedo Park, New York, for Pierre Lorillard in 1885 is a well-known suburban planning project.³ Initially conceived of as a summer resort, this elite community attracted year-round residents with its winding streets laid out around natural and artificial lakes to create homesites with spectacular views of the rural surroundings.

An important precedent for Tuxedo Park was the only project Bowditch is known to have completed in Maine, the plan for Point Lookout on Isle au Haut. Located on the northwest section of the island, Point Lookout typifies in its plan resort communities of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The house lots are situated on a hill overlooking a small harbor and are arranged to maximize ocean views and privacy for the residents. Curving boardwalks link

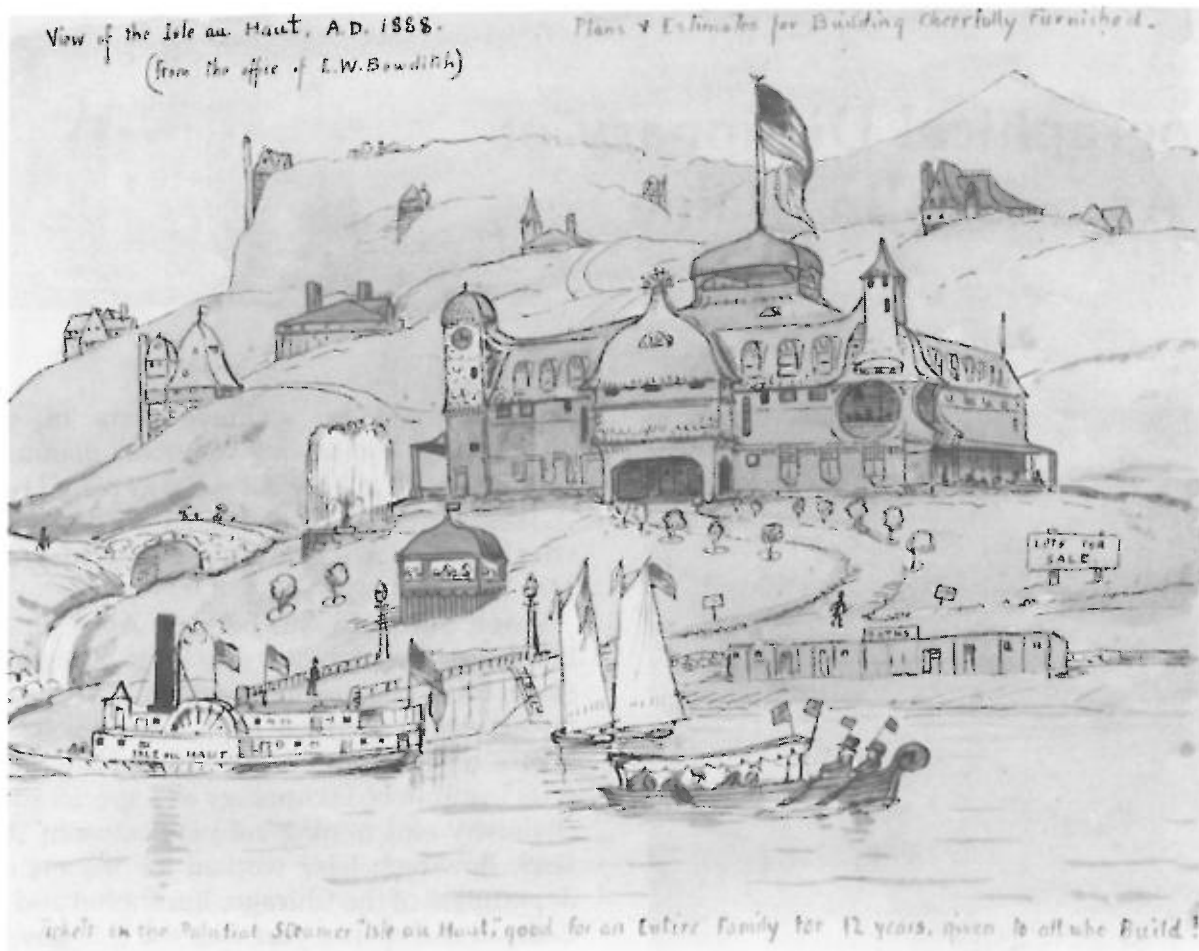


Figure 1. "View of the Isle au Haut, A.D. 1888" from *The Isle Au Haut Picture Book* by George S. Wasson, Boston, Privately Printed (Courtesy of Nathaniel R. Bowditch).

the houses to the centrally-located clubhouse, while unpaved roads wind behind the cottages to provide access for vehicles ferried over from the mainland. The resulting harmony between nature and architecture is characteristic of the suburban and resort communities that grew up along the Maine coast and elsewhere in the Northeast after 1850. The design for Point Lookout represents not only this larger development in town planning, but also provides an illustration of Bowditch's personal aesthetic. In an account of his own career, Bowditch stated, "...I believe that a landscape should be treated like a picture, in which the buildings are merely elements, and usually subordinate elements of the entire scheme of treatment."⁴ The alternative of unregulated development on Isle au Haut was satirized in an 1880s sketch which featured a grotesquely picturesque hotel and numerous cottages (Figure 1).

At Tuxedo Park membership in the exclusive Tuxedo Club was a prerequisite for purchasing real estate in the community, and at Point Lookout the social make-up of the community was also strictly regulated. Bowditch was among the men from

Boston, New York, and Philadelphia who formed the Point Lookout Improvement Company in 1877 and built a collectively-owned clubhouse. Bowditch personally owned the land at the point and built and sold houses with deed restrictions, giving himself and his heirs rights of first refusal should the cottages later be re-sold. In this way he was able to personally select future residents.⁵ Evidently Bowditch believed that the combination of amenities at Point Lookout and the assurance of compatible neighbors would draw many summer residents to Isle au Haut. Correspondence between Ernest and Margaret Bowditch indicates that the family spent considerable amounts of time on Isle au Haut during the summer months and that they may have visited other resort communities as well. In a letter dated August 30, 1905, Ernest Bowditch reminded his wife, "When you see me again ask me to tell you about a Japanese tea given by a Mrs. Raymond Perkins at York Harbor, Maine—quite racy and worth while."⁶

The plan for Pepperell Park in Saco of 1884 is similar to that of Point Lookout in its relationship to contemporary landscape aesthetics (Figure 2). Like

the layout of the island resort, the park design provides for circulation with curving paths in the manner of the great urban park plans of the Olmsted firm. While Bowditch leaves some large open spaces in the interior of the park, the periphery is ringed with trees to screen from view the nearby streets and railroad tracks. The town evidently did not appreciate the naturalism of Bowditch's plan, for ultimately a more formal design with a central fountain was adopted.

Although only two Maine projects by Ernest Bowditch are now known, it is likely that his social connections brought other commissions for estate grounds, town plans, and parks in the state's new watering places of the late nineteenth century. It is hoped that further research will document other Maine landscape projects by Bowditch and his contemporaries.

Kevin D. Murphy
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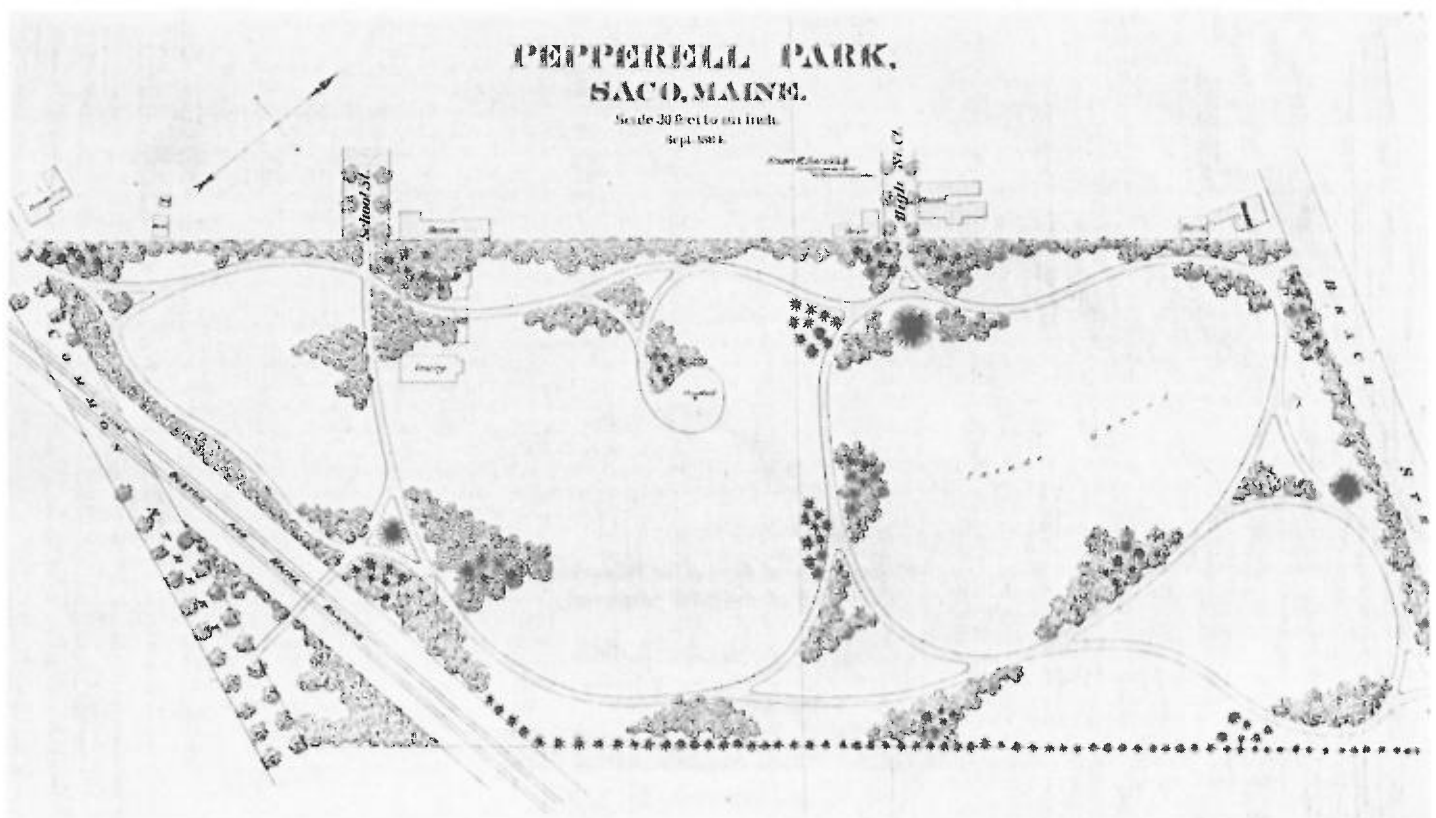


Figure 2. Plan of Pepperell Park, Saco by Ernest W. Bowditch, September, 1884
(Courtesy of Dyer Library, Saco).

NOTES

- ¹ *The American Architect*, Vol. 113 (1918), p. 806.
- ² See the entry on Bowditch in *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, New York, 1941, Vol. 29, p. 157.
- ³ See James Kornwolf, "'American Architecture and the Aesthetic Movement'" in *In Pursuit of Beauty, Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, New York, 1986, pp. 376-377.
- ⁴ This statement is contained in Volume 1 of Bowditch's personal recollections which are part of the Bowditch Papers at the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts. Cynthia Zaitzevsky kindly brought these important documents to my attention.
- ⁵ Much of the information on the history of Point Lookout was provided by Carolyn and Bruce Bergen as well as Frederick Eustis in personal interviews on August 9, 1986.
- ⁶ Bowditch Papers, Essex Institute. Bowditch is probably referring here to Mrs. Newton (Mary Sowles) Perkins whose home is now owned by the Old York Historical Society. She is known to have given a Japanese tea in 1905 in honor of envoys to the Russo-Japanese Peace Conference held in Portsmouth that year.

KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ERNEST W. BOWDITCH

Plan for Point Lookout, Isle au Haut, c. 1877
Plan for Pepperell Park, Saco, 1884

SOURCES AND DRAWINGS

The primary sources of information on Bowditch's career are the two volumes of his reminiscences contained in the Bowditch Papers at the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts. There are no drawings by Bowditch in the collection. The drawing of Pepperell Park plan is in the collection of the Dyer Library in Saco, Maine.

Photograph of Ernest W. Bowditch
Courtesy of the MIT Museum.

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